

Jim Clemmer's Leader Letter



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With the Chilean miners successfully rescued, the questions around how they became trapped in the first place will lead to numerous investigative media reports and inquiries. Those stories, reports, and inquiries are now emerging around the giant BP oil disaster this spring and summer in the Gulf of Mexico.

Early stories and reports in both cases have hinted at – or directly pointed to – corporate cultures that encouraged risky behaviors or cutting corners. As more of the stories emerge, no doubt we'll hear conclusions that are similar to those of the Columbia Accident Investigation Board, which determined the cause of the 2003 explosion of the Columbia space shuttle was rooted in NASA's leadership and culture.

A theme through this issue is to look at the leadership behaviors - both top down and leading upward - that builds high-performing cultures or leads to disaster. We'll also continue themes from the last few issues on dealing with adversity, courageous conversations, and how what's new in leadership is the wrong question.

INVOLVED LEADERSHIP: THEY SEE YOU LOUD AND CLEAR

This fall we've been working extensively with executive teams striving to transform their cultures to boost safety, customer service, quality, and leadership at all levels. I wrote about some of the work involving our Commitment Continuum in an earlier blog post which was published in our October issue of *The Leader Letter* ("[Lasting Culture Change Means Going Beyond Passionate Lip Service to Involved Leadership](#)").

We hear many sermons given by senior managers preaching the virtues of improving service/quality, safety, efficiency, or better leading ("people: our most important resource".) In turn, executives are making their managers place their metaphorical left hands over their hearts, while raising their right to pledge allegiance to teamwork, customers, accountability, employee engagement, change, and the like.

But little changes. The people on the frontline actually selling, making, delivering, or supporting the products or services grow ever more wary and cynical about the hollow ring of words behind inconsistent action. In many executive retreats we've facilitated, a common issue -- and often a source of frustration -- emerges: how do we get our people to be more concerned about service, quality, innovation, teamwork, safety, continuous improvement, or whatever values and priorities the executive team has determined it wants to instill? The frustration comes from a sense that managers, supervisors, and frontline performers aren't getting the message. They need to be "smartened up."

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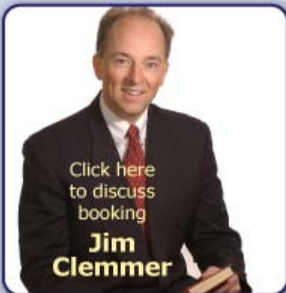
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Values are a contagious affliction that spreads from a team or organization's leaders. The key question is: are yours worth catching? As we survey customers, audit the cultural climate, and work with others throughout organizations, it's clear that everyone is marching to roughly the same beat as the management team at the top of the department, division, or company. The values are being followed and lived by the majority of the organization -- that is, the values as exemplified by senior management actions. All too often, senior managers don't recognize their own values being reflected back to them. Their intended values are out of step with their lived values.

Senior executives live in an organizational fishbowl. Every word and action is analyzed and studied for its deeper meaning of what's really important. These individual stories and examples are discussed throughout the organization and become part of the folklore from which organizational members define priorities, meaning, and culture. E-mails quickly fired back or forwarded with unguarded comments, a casual aside at a meeting, what's first on meeting agendas, who's invited, what seems to be uppermost on the senior executive's mind according to the questions he or she asks -- these all become grist for discussion and interpretation of what senior management values most.

So it's not enough for the senior executive team to be "committed" to whatever the change effort may be focused on. That's like asking if you are "committed" to family, world peace, or being a good person. There's lukewarm "commitment" and then there's "commitment" that's bordering on obsession. Since we all know that actions speak much louder than words, senior managers need to work hard on visibly signaling their commitment so strongly and consistently that there can be no room for doubt about how critical the culture change effort is to the organization's future.

An industrial magnate once told Mark Twain that he would like to climb Mount Sinai and read aloud the Ten Commandments. Twain is reported to have responded by saying, "Why don't you just stay home and live them?" The American poet and scholar, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, could have been talking about leadership when he observed, "We judge ourselves by what we feel capable of doing, but others judge us by what we have already done."

Executives can only lead the improvement journey from the front. There can be no delegating or mere cheerleading. That means that the executive team's daily management style and practices become a pivotal part of setting the tone, pace, style, and example for the whole improvement effort.

MANAGEMENT TEAM BEHAVIORS THAT SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

Here are two key behaviors that send very loud, visual messages about managers' true priorities:

Visible, Felt Leadership or Remote Control Management

Managers in high-performing organizations spend much more time "managing by wandering around" with employees, suppliers, partners, and customers than traditional -- and less effective -- managers do. Too many managers manage by remote control through e-mail and office meetings. Senior managers who are stuck in their offices answering e-mails or holding court with those wily or

privileged enough to make it past the moat guards (executive assistants) create a legion of managers or supervisors who aspire to do the same. And so the moat separating "we" (management) and "them" (employees) grows ever wider and deeper.

What's keeping managers locked in their offices and meeting rooms? Generally it's managing by remote control - often micromanaging -- on operating details, crisis management, or approving plans from staff support people who are often even further separated from operations. Analyzing and fixing problems at their root cause belongs to empowered teams along with operations if the organization is going to develop relevant improvements that are owned by those who must make them work. Managers must get out of their offices and "manage the team or organization's context."

That means, for example, constantly repeating the "stump speech" the management team has developed on what business they're in, where the organization is going, and what they believe in. Not only will that help focus and guide the organization, but it forces managers to push operations down to where it belongs and takes them out of the burdensome and destructive "upward delegation" loop.

Management Group or Management Team

Far too many management groups are quick to sing the praises of teamwork -- for the rest of the organization. Their own personal behavior with each other and with their peers is still within the "rugged individualism" mould. Because many grew up in the segmented, "command and control" era of "vertical chimneys," individualistic, "fix the problem or person, not the process" behavior is what got them promoted. It's often all they know. As a result, they are frequently one of the many reactive managers who either act independently of other divisions or departments or swoop in to solve the problem but leave the underlying root causes in place.

The more we help to build high-performing cultures, the clearer it becomes that the way an organization behaves as a whole (its culture) is a reflection of the way the management team leading it behaves. Too often we see management groups that aren't teams at all. They are a group of high-powered individualists. They are not a team.

Sometimes managers take potshots and "snipe" at each other or other departments. Other managers don't "sing off the same sheet of music" by emphasizing the same areas and delivering consistent messages throughout the organization. The result is always an organization full of thick vertical chimneys, searching for the guilty, covering their backside, sub-optimization at the expense of the whole process or organization, disharmony, and everyone out for themselves.

Significant and lasting leadership and culture transformation is not possible without extensive management and employee involvement through a wide variety of teams. But team development has to start at the top if it is to "take." So get out that mirror and look at your team. Are you truly a team or are you really just a group of individuals who meet occasionally?

"The most effective communication is face-to-face. The most believable communication is behavior." We find that most management team members agree with that statement. However, many managers judge themselves by their intentions. But the people they are leading can only use what they see -- actions -- as a basis for judging intentions and priorities.

A CULTURE OF COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS - SPEAKING UP AND LISTENING - OVERCOMES THE PRICE OF FEAR

A recent survey of more than 400,000 employees across various industries by the Corporate Executive Board (CEB) showed that "nearly half of executive teams lack the information they need to manage effectively because employees withhold vital input out of fear that doing otherwise will reflect poorly on them. This restricted information flow can cripple a company's ability to identify and respond to internal and external threats."

The CEB research found "companies rated by their employees in the top quartile in terms of openness of communication have delivered 10 year Total Shareholder Return (TSR) of 7.9 percent compared with 2.1 percent at other companies. In addition, they also had materially lower levels of observed fraud and misconduct." Of the 12 key indicators that CEB tracks in their culture diagnostic, "the one that is most strongly correlated with 10-year TSR is employee comfort speaking up. The most important driver of this comfort is a lack of fear of retaliation."

A culture of fear or weak *two-way communications* is a major blind spot for many organizations. Many organizations have risk management programs focused on financial and compliance risks. But rarely do companies understand the deep and serious risks of their closed communications cultures. Read more about the research at "[Organizational Culture: An Overlooked Internal Risk](#)" (select "Open".)

As I tried to show in the fictional story of Pete Leonard in [Moose on the Table: A Novel Approach to Communications @ Work](#), courageous conversations involve both speaking up and listening. The sad irony is that many managers believe they have an "open door policy," are approachable, and foster open discussion and debate. But many times they mistake silence and the lack of problems being raised as signs they don't have big moose (or elephants or 800 pound gorillas) issues in their team or organization. Too often the manager's aggressive and overbearing style (sometimes wrapped in a velvet fist) is the moose.

Here's where you can find articles, quizzes, examples, and other resources on dealing with moose-on-the-table and courageous communications:

[Authentic Communication: Dealing with Moose-on-the-Table](#)

The moose represents an issue that everyone knows is a problem but isn't being addressed. People are trying to carry on as if things are normal. By failing to declare the issue, they further empower it.

[Moose Track Quiz](#)

Use this short 12-point questionnaire to do some moose hunting.

[The Story Behind the Story](#)

How I use the moose-on-the-table metaphor and wrote the fictional *Moose on the Table* story.

[Moose Stories, Examples, and Discussions](#)

See a variety of short examples and readers interactions on dealing with moose from an earlier issue of [The Leader Letter](#).

[So You Think You're a Good Listener](#)

An item excerpted from *Harvard Business Review* on research showing a big gap between managers' self-evaluations and colleagues' assessments of their approachability and openness.

[Moose-on-the-Table: How to Have Courageous Conversations Addressing Barriers to Teamwork](#)

Customized and practical half or one-day moose hunting workshops or part of a management team retreat.

THOUGHTS THAT MAKE YOU GO HMMM ON... COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS

My last blog post highlighted the big problem of a culture of fear within many teams and organizations. In the middle of preparing today's post, I'm doing some fall clean up in my garden while listening to a radio panel discussion on the huge problem of medical errors. Fear of speaking up or admitting mistakes - a lack of openness - was cited as one of the key contributors to deaths, injuries, infections, and prolonged sickness from medical errors.

Courageous conversations work both ways. It takes courage to stand up and speak up and it takes courage to sit down and listen.

"A British study found that telling bosses honestly and openly what you think of them actually benefits both managers and employees, boosting morale, reducing stress and improving communication...bosses actually do listen. Managers told by their employees what they thought of them were more likely to change, and improve, their management style. Those that didn't were less likely to change, the study found. "Upward feedback from employees is critical to helping managers understand how they're being perceived," says Emma Donaldson-Feidler, a London-based occupational psychologist and author of the study."
- "Frankly Speaking," Eleanor Beaton, *The Globe & Mail*

"We know that communication is a problem, but the company is not going to discuss it with the employees."
- Manager's response to an engagement survey at a large telecommunications company

"In our view, the NASA organizational culture had as much to do with this accident as the foam...safety staff and some engineers were largely silent during the events leading up to the loss of Columbia...no one at NASA wants to be the one to stand up and say, "We can't make that date."...a pattern of ineffective communication had resulted, leaving risks improperly defined, problems unreported, and concerns unexpressed."

- Conclusions of the Columbia Accident Investigation Board formed to determine the cause of the 2003 explosion of the Columbia space shuttle when returning to earth

"He who does not bellow the truth when he knows the truth makes himself the accomplice of liars and forgers."

- Charles Peguy, 1873-1914, French poet, essayist, and editor

"Leaders can take steps to nurture transparency. By being open and candid, admitting their errors, encouraging employees to speak truth to power, and rewarding contrarians, executives can model the kind of conduct they want to see. Training employees to handle unpleasant conversations with grace also will break down barriers to honest communication...perhaps the biggest lever for cultural change is the executive selection process - choosing leaders for their transparent behavior, not just their ability to compete."

- "What's Needed Next: A Culture of Candor," professors James O'Toole, of the University of Denver's Daniels College of Business, and Warren Bennis, of the University of Southern California, *Harvard Business Review*

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

- Edmund Burke, 18th century Irish statesman, author, orator, political theorist, and philosopher

TWEET READING: RECOMMENDED ONLINE RESOURCES

This section summarizes last month's LinkedIn Updates and Twitter Tweets sent about online articles or blog posts that I've flagged as worth reading. These are usually posted on weekends when I am doing much of my reading for research, learning, or leisure.

Do a quick leadership checkup with this succinct and practical summary of keys to leading ourselves and our teams toward peak performance.

[Five Powers that Get Ideas off the Ground](#) - Rosabeth Moss Kanter -...blogs.hbr.org

"In years of detailed observation of successful leaders across sectors and fields, I've seen that getting the credibility to reach important goals comes from uplifting actions that increase five personal and organizational powers."

Listening and learning is fundamental to strong leadership. The ratio of telling to asking is way out of whack with many managers.

[Listen, Learn - and Then Lead](#)

businessweek.com

"Leadership: It is better seen and felt than defined and stated," advises Korn/Ferry Chief Executive Officer Gary Burnison.

Culture is a powerful force that's increasingly talked about but often not well shaped and harnessed to strengthen teams and organizations.

[Workers agree: company culture matters](#)

theglobeandmail.com

"Cost-cutting and drives to increase efficiency may be dragging down workplace morale these days, but that can be overcome by maintaining a strong culture, a new survey shows."

Some useful insights on why so many managers complain about - and then perpetuate the huge time suck of so many wasteful meetings.

[Why We Secretly Love Meetings](#) - Ron Ashkenas
Harvard Business Review blogs

"Is too much of your time spent in unnecessary or ineffective meetings? If so, you're not alone. Most managers consider meeting fatigue and meeting failures as two of the most significant drains on their productivity."

Excellent reminders of basic truths it's way too easy to lose track of as we race through life.

[Regina Brett's 45 life lessons and 5 to grow on](#)
"To celebrate growing older, I once wrote the 45 lessons life taught me. It is the most-requested column I've ever written. My odometer rolls over to 50 this week, so here's an update."

John's three questions provide practical pondering on how to keep our leadership focused on constantly shifting priorities and adding value.

[How Adversity Can Mold a Leader's Ability to Deliver Value](#) *Fast Company*

"You need not be shown the door to learn how to manage more effectively now. Simply envisioning what it would be like to leave can challenge you to think about what you would do differently now. Toward that end here are three questions..."

BOUNCING BACK FROM ADVERSITY IS A CRITICAL LEADERSHIP SKILL

Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional. The happiest and most effective people are Leaders who may need a "therapeutic visit to Pity City" but bounce back from changes, setbacks, and problems. However, most people are Followers and wait for someone else to show the way or help them decide how to feel or respond.

And the most ineffective and unhappiest people are Wallowers blaming others, bad luck, or feeling trapped by their failures and weaknesses. You can see a chart comparing these three choices at [Which Framing Level - Wallowing, Following, Or Leading?](#)

The biggest problem for many Followers and Wallowers is recognizing their own behavior when the "you-know-what hits the fan." I recently came across research from PEAK Learning that measured the resilience

of 1,600 people in the UK and how their responses to adversity correlated with happiness, quality of life, exercise, diet, energy, optimism, engagement at work, sick days, and a broad range of health factors. The researchers found that *"resilience was statistically significant in predicting not one or two, but all of these factors."*

PEAK Learning CEO, Paul Stoltz, is the originator of the Adversity Quotient (AQ) theory and method, currently used within Harvard Business School's Executive Education program as part of PEAK's research. In his HBR blog post [When Adversity Strikes, What Do You Do?](#) he outlines the Adversity Continuum below. What's your home on the range? What about the majority of people in your team/organization?

1. **Avoiding Adversity** - *Do you ever postpone, delegate, ignore, or sidestep a difficulty that you could or should have taken on?*
2. **Surviving Adversity** - *Sometimes coming out alive is a major victory. But then life asks, "Now what?" or "What do we do now?"*

3. **Coping with Adversity** - How much energy do you expend just keeping your head above water, or coping with your daily dose of adversity?
4. **Managing Adversity** - Beyond coping, how often do you at least do something positive with the adversity?
5. **Harnessing Adversity** - How often do you use the adversity to achieve gains you could never enjoy without it? How many moments do you have, when, like an alchemist you convert adversity into fuel that propels you to a place you could never get to without it?

Stoltz surveyed more than 1,000 companies in 53 countries with these questions and found that *"the sad truth is, most (70-90 percent) of the time, people do some combination of avoiding, surviving, and coping, meaning adversity is consuming them (Following or Wallowing.) About 10-30 percent of the time people will manage the adversity. Very rarely (five percent) do people and their enterprises truly harness it."*

Dealing with adversity is a critical leadership issue. How do you bounce back? How do you help your colleagues or team members stay in Leading mode? My next post will provide you with tips and techniques for reframing and thriving during turbulent times.

LEADING THROUGH ADVERSITY: REFRAMING TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

My last post ("Bouncing Back from Adversity is a Core Leadership Skill") featured PEAK's Learning Adversity Continuum. The research that produced this response range for dealing with life's setbacks, pain, and suffering showed that a tiny minority of people (strong Leaders) use adversity as fuel to move toward ever higher personal and team/organizational leadership.

A critical and fundamental step in harnessing adversity is to reframe the situation. This means shifting from a pessimistic to an optimistic viewpoint. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has made tremendous strides in helping people with pessimistic explanatory styles become much more optimistic. This involves teaching how to dispute Wallowing thoughts through self-argument, weighing objective evidence, exploring more desirable alternatives, "de-catastrophizing" the long-term implications, and challenging the usefulness of dwelling on that negative belief/view.

Here's a menu of reframing tips and techniques I pulled together for [*Growing @ the Speed of Change*](#):

- Don't generalize or judge. Instead of generalizing - "life's unfair" - you might more specifically say, "This is unfair."
- Ask what's the worst that could happen? Will you be boiled in hot lard? Will they take away your kids? Will you be tarred, feathered, and dragged down Main Street?
- Think of the situation you're facing as a video or board game; you have this puzzle to solve. What are the possibilities? What are your choices?
- Imagine how a strong leader whom you admire might handle this situation.
- Recall or even list times in the past when you overcame problems as bad as or worse than this one. What can you draw from those experiences? Can they at least help you keep this problem in perspective?
- Read stories of major obstacles or adversity that others have overcome in their lives. How does your problem compare? What can you learn from them?

- Force yourself to get moving by getting some exercise, taking a walk, or having a workout.
- Notice and label your thoughts as they pop into your head. "There's anger." "That's fear." "I feel sad." "There's a negative affirmation." Say them out loud either to yourself or a confidante. Write down or discuss alternatives.
- Think of your brain as another body organ, like your stomach. Just as you might notice your empty stomach growling, you can notice "there goes my brain again being a worry wart." Or, "I see my brain is still clinging to that old hurt."
- Pretend your negative thoughts are loud, annoying commercials trying to sell you junk you don't need. You might respond with "Not today," "I am not buying that one," or, "Where is the mute button so I can silence your annoying drivel?"
- Schedule regular reflection time. Review your vision, values, and purpose. Read inspirational material. Meditate. Focus on life's bigger issues and put today's concerns into context.

Martin Seligman is a CBT guru and has researched and written extensively about pessimism/optimism. *Learned Optimism* is one of his earlier books that's become a classic. His more recent book, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* is one of the best self-leadership books of our time. He writes, "The key to disputing your own pessimistic thoughts is to first recognize them and then to treat them as if they were uttered by an external person, a rival whose mission in life was to make you miserable." Read my reviews of both books on [my LinkedIn Profile](#).

KEYS TO STRATEGIC HR LEADERSHIP

This fall we're deep in the thick of helping a number of Clients plan and execute extensive multi-year implementations of leadership and culture development processes to dramatically boost customer service, product/service quality, safety, employee engagement, succession planning, efficiencies, and other key elements of organization effectiveness. Since leadership and culture development are clearly people issues, we end up doing quite a bit of work with HR managers and executives.

We continue to find stark and sharp contrasts between those HR professionals who are strong strategic leaders and those who are more tactical HR administrators. Since I speak at HR conferences about keys to HR leadership, I am always watching for research on the best practices of the best HR leaders.

The RBL Group's [major and ongoing HR research study](#) reported in "Developing the Skills of HR Business Partnership" is an insightful look at the competencies of strong HR leaders. They conclude, "the HR community has work to do. Both groups (HR and operational managers) reinforced the need for HR to increase professional skills in consulting and managing change." RBL found that the best HR leaders balance People and Business skills in these clusters:

- Talent Manager/Organization Designer
- Culture and Change Steward
- Strategy Architect
- Operational Executor
- Business Ally
- Credible Activist

This research is consistent with the Six Steps to Strategic HR Leadership that I give to HR professionals in HR conference keynotes and workshops:

1. Coach/Develop Your Top Management Team to Better Balance Technical, Management, and Leadership
2. Have/Foster Courageous Conversations to Address the Moose-on-the-Table
3. Model and Facilitate Two-Way Communication versus Information Dumps
4. Pull the Pieces Together with an Integrated and Strategic Approach Linked to Critical Organizational Goals
5. Search for Systemic/Root Causes and Teach Holistic/Strategic Thinking to Recurring HR Issues
6. Build-in Higher Flexibility and Change Adaptability with Shared Leadership at All Levels

If you're an HR professional use The RBL Group HR competencies and the Six Steps for a self-assessment. Better yet, get an assessment on these critical competencies and skills from your operational managers and executives. If you're a senior manager or executive with HR professionals reporting to you, use the most relevant HR skills and competencies you'd like to see to clarify your expectations for the HR function and provide coaching/career discussions with your HR leader.

COMPLIMENTARY MONTHLY PODCAST OF *FIRING ON ALL CYLINDERS* EXCERPTS NOW AVAILABLE (NO CHARGE)

Just after [*Firing on All Cylinders: The Service/Quality System for High-Powered Corporate Performance*](#) was published (now over 100,000 copies sold), I recorded an audio series reading excerpts from the book. We are now making these freely available in a weekly podcast series. [CLICK HERE](#) to access the installments as they are posted. We'll be posting all 10 segments over the next 10 weeks. On this page you can sign up to be notified whenever the next segment is available.

You can learn more about this series and look at an overview of the audio on the [*Firing on all Cylinders audio CD*](#) web site page.

READ IT HERE OR HOT OFF MY BLOG

The items in each month's issue of *The Leader Letter* are first published in my [blog](#) (updated twice per week) the previous month. You can wait to read it all together each month in *The Leader Letter* or you can read each item as a [blog](#) post and have them sent directly to you hot off my computer by signing up at <http://www.jimclemmer.com/blog/>. Just enter your e-mail address in the upper left corner box under "Sign up for E-mail Blog Notification."

MOST POPULAR OCTOBER IMPROVEMENT POINTS

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Here are the three most popular Improvement Points we sent out in October:

"Leaders are rarely naturals. Certainly some are innately better at some aspects of leadership than others. For example, they may be more verbal or naturally "people-oriented" than their technical or administratively inclined management counterparts. But most highly effective leaders have invested countless hours and long years in numerous forms of self-development."

- from Jim Clemmer's article, "Blazing Our Own Unique Leadership Path"

[Read the full article now!](#)

"The emptier work is, the more people look elsewhere for fulfillment; so we demand more money and incentives to continue working in such a meaningless, unfulfilling job (which then "proves" to managers that people won't improve their performance unless they're bribed to do so.) Money is rarely an effective rallying point for high performance. That's because money doesn't provide deeper meaning and inspiration for a bigger cause and purpose."

- from Jim Clemmer's article, "Weak Leaders Try to Use Money as a Motivator"

[Read the full article now!](#)

"If we are unhappy with the behavior of people on our team or in our organization, we need to take a closer look at the system and structure they're working in. If they behave like bureaucrats, they're likely working in a bureaucracy. If they're not customer focused, they're probably using systems and working in structure that weren't designed to serve the servers and/or customers."

- from Jim Clemmer's article, "Organization Structure Limits or Liberates High Performance"

[Read the full article now!](#)

FEEDBACK AND FOLLOW-UP

I am always delighted to hear from readers of *The Leader Letter* with feedback, reflections, suggestions, or differing points of view. Nobody is ever identified in *The Leader Letter* without their permission. I am also happy to explore customized, in-house adaptations of any of my material for your team or organization. Drop me an e-mail at Jim.Clemmer@Clemmer.net.

Keep learning, laughing, loving, and leading – living life just for the L of it!!

Jim

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